

Castlemaine Naturalist

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Tullaroop Twice

Our last outing for the year was to Tullaroop Dam, a popular spot with the Club where there have been some special sightings over the years. About 3 years ago the highlight of the day was a Regent Honeyeater, and these days Diamond Firetails are often seen around the picnic area.

The 13th of December was rather warm, so we met at 4 o'clock and drove to the "far side", in the bush area, and eventually had our tea on the "island", which wasn't anything like an island that day, and the water must have been over 100 metres from the trees.

Not long after we arrived an Echidna was spotted wandering through the bush not far from the fence. It seemed to be a young animal, with rich dark fur between gingery quills - quite a handsome animal.

Numerous birds were seen, both on the water and in the trees, though I only made a list of 27 species, but the highlight came while we were sitting eating our tea. A huge number of Great Black Cormorants came flying low over the water. Ken Dredge's account follows this article.

Our next outing was on January 10. I met Maggie at her place just after 5 o'clock in the morning, expecting to see at least 3 or 4 others there, despite the shower of rain earlier, but we seemed the only two who were going out at that hour, but we decided it would be well worth it even if we were the only ones except for Chris and Helen Morris who had arranged to meet us out there a bit later, in time for breakfast. We drove well under the speed limit, with a close eye on the sides of the road, but saw no kangaroos. As we drove over the Moloort Plain the sky was lightening, and despite the showers, the clouds seemed to be breaking up, promising a fine morning, and perhaps a colourful sunrise. It was still pretty dark when we pulled up at Tullaroop, and out of gloom appeared Maureen and Ken Dredge and Margaret Badminton, who had

beaten us there by 10 and 15 minutes respectively!

As the light strengthened we could see hundreds of ducks, mainly Shelducks and Musk Ducks, on the water, where they had apparently spent the night, and we could hear what seemed to be dozens of Blue Wrens. Only the faintest of pink tinged the clouds, as we watched a hare hop over onto the lawn area and start to feed, while a cool breeze blew over the water, and the whole world seemed new and beautiful. Soon we began to spot the wrens amongst the grass and the shrubs, and I was intrigued to note that many of them were Blueys.

As the sun came up flocks of Musk and Purple-crowned Lorikeets started zooming between trees and feeding - until the Wattlebirds chased them on. The Shelducks began to fly off, and the Black Ducks to feed, but most of the Musk Ducks kept their heads under their wings for a bit longer. The coming of the light revealed more and more birds, and after breakfast we wandered down to the lower picnic area. On the way I called in at the loo and found a Willie Wagtail had got itself trapped behind the fly wire that has been put above the toilet doors to prevent the Welcome Swallows from nesting in there. I finished up standing on the bowl, hoping that I wouldn't slip, and finally managed to chivvy him with one hand through the door I held open with the other hand. Him? I think so. When I got down to where the others were there was a real Willie Wagtail barney going on, and "my" one was easily recognisable by his rather tattered tail feathers after his ordeal. He would gobble a few insects, and then again set in pursuit of the interloper, with his white eyebrow clearly showing, advertising his aggression.

By the time we left at about ½ past 8 we had a list of 37 species, including the Great Black Cormorants, a Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Crested Grebes and a Black-winged Stilt.

Rita Mills

Great Black Cormorants at Tullaroop

On our last outing for the year to Tullaroop Reservoir on Dec. 13 we were very fortunate to witness an unusual display by a large group (360 birds) of Great Black Cormorants.

As we were all gathered enjoying our tea on the banks of the Res. at approximately 7pm the first group of many birds appeared from upstream. Their behaviour was most unusual as they would fly low for a short distance, approx. 40-50 metres, then splash down and continue splashing and "playing" for a few minutes before their next departure. They continued in this fashion for about 1 km, "short-hopping" their way downstream and out of sight. They did not appear to be feeding.

About 30 minutes later as we were finishing our meal the birds started to reappear. This time they were flying low over the water back upstream in small groups. I counted them as they went by over a 15 minute period reaching a total of 360 birds.

I contacted Peggy Mitchell of B.O.C.A. who said the behaviour, although recorded, is not common.

She also asked to be remembered, and sent best wishes to Kay Turner.

Ken Dredge.

Birds, 21 Hunter Street

January '98

A small group of Musk Lorikeets are feeding in the flowering eucalypts in the nearby Kalimna bush and our garden. The Rufous Whistlers are still with us and seem particularly joyous this summer. Eastern Spinebills, New Holland Honeyeaters and a pair of Wattlebirds feed on the flowering shrubs, and three Crimson Rosellas were hatched in the nest box. The pardalote box was also inhabited by a pair of Striated Pardalotes and their family.

Cleaning and filling the bird bath is a frequent chore - the water soon resembles a muddy soup from the many visitors cooling off from the heat each day.

Before the storms of Jan 14th there seemed to be many hungry small birds appearing instantly on the occasions I scattered crumbs from a stale loaf of bread around the back garden. Along with the sparrows were wrens, silvereyes and thornbills, all eager for a share.

Shirley Parnaby

From the National Parks Association:-

Saving Victoria's Box-Ironbark Forests and Woodlands.

Our last chance?

Leading Environmental groups, including the Victorian National Parks Association, are now working together as the National Woodlands Alliance to save Australia's "forgotten forests" - the dry, sparse, temperate woodlands of the wheat and sheep belt.

Victoria's Box-Ironbark woodlands are one of the worst hit woodland types with 85% *already cleared*. This has principally been due to broad-scale clearing for agriculture, which has now largely ceased. But Victoria's Box-Ironbark forests remain in critical danger. 72% of these remnant woodlands are on public land, mostly State Forest open to

exploitation by logging, mining, grazing and other degrading land uses. Present conservation reserves are small in size and number and grossly inadequate.

Firewood harvesting occurs on a scale equivalent to woodchipping and is responsible for massive destruction of habitat. Goldmining, which entails *complete* removal of vegetation and soil devastates the Box-Ironbark country of northern Victoria. Grazing, eucalyptus oil harvesting and residential subdivision also contribute to the degradation of this ecosystem. Box-Ironbark woodlands support a very high number of flora, fauna and vegetation communities. It is home to over 160 threatened species as well as many others known to be declining. These include Swift Parrots, Regent Honeyeaters, Barking Owls, Pink-tailed Worm-lizards, and Maroon Spider Orchids. Without prompt action and protection these species will be lost forever.

Despite this diversity, only 2% of the original extent of Box-Ironbark forest is contained in permanent conservation reserves that prohibit destructive land uses - well below the 15% federal forest reserve benchmark.

Although one small National Park has been declared at Chiltern, this one 4500 hectare area is simply not enough habitat to halt the wave of extinctions that is sweeping across northern Victoria.

It is hoped that as a result of the newly appointed Environment Conservation Council's special investigation into public land use a permanent, comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system for Box-Ironbark forests and woodlands will be achieved.

The ECC process relies heavily on submissions from the public in making its recommendations to the government. This is *your* opportunity to help save a critically threatened ecosystem.

Submissions are crucial - 1998 may be the last chance ever to save Victoria's Box-Ironbark Woodlands.

For information on how to make a submission to the ECC, call Charlie Sherwin at VNPA on (03) 9650 8296. To obtain the ECC issues and resources report on Box-Ironbark woodlands, call Information Victoria on 1300 366356.

Lyndall Bull. VNPA

In Flower this Month

Cherry Ballart

(*Exocarpus cupressiformis*)

This small pyramidal tree (it grows to 6 m) belongs to the Santalacæ, or Ballart and Quandong, family and is a root parasite.

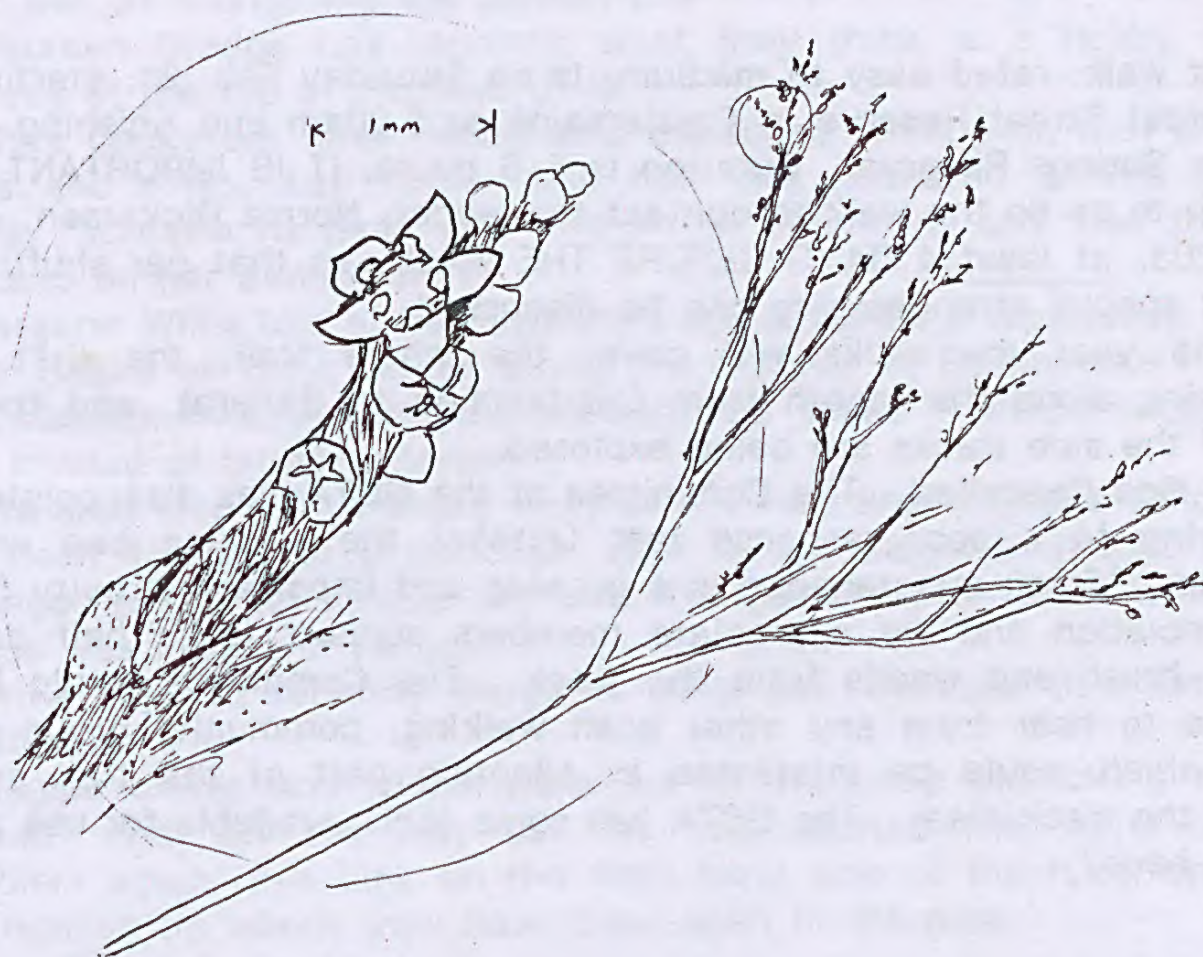
Exocarpus = outside fruit - the red "fruit" of the Cherry Ballart is actually the swollen stem and the hard fruit is attached to the end. The "cherry" has a pleasant flavour, and in pioneering days was sometimes - with much patience I would think - made into a jam.

Cupressiformis = cypress-like. The almost leafless branches (the leaves are only tiny scales along the branches) resemble that of the cypress.

Found in forests throughout eastern Australia it is quite common in this district. The cherries are much loved by a number of birds, but I have found over the last few years the plants seem to be increasing in number and there is more and more fruit being left on the trees - which I appreciate, because I like them, too.

As can be seen by the illustration the flowers are minute, and a hand lens or inverted binoculars is required to appreciate them. About 1mm across they are five petalled, yellowish in colour, and grow in short cylindrical spikes. Usually I find the plant in flower in January and February, but last year I found occasional flowers appearing until about July or August - a response to the dry conditions?

Rita Mills



Sparrows

This summer has been remarkable for the numbers of very tiny sparrow nestlings which have been found dead on the brick path to the front gate or on the concrete drive – sometimes two or three in one day, and nowhere near any nest. It is unlikely that neighbourhood cats could scale the high brick walls of our old house, and we have blocked off most of the accessible areas under the roof and eaves where the nests seem located. No birds of prey have been noticed, though a pair of Kookaburras are in this area occasionally.

Perhaps they are removed from the nest as a form of population control! The little corpses are unmarked, and seem to have died from exposure to the heat.

We have excessive numbers of the pests, continually and noisily fighting and harassing each other, and monopolising the bird bath. Any advice on exterminating them would be welcome. Several nests were made in the ivy clustered on the wall of the house, but none seemed to have been occupied when we removed them.

Shirley Parnaby.

Great Dividing Trail Walks

The Club is a member of the Great Dividing Trail Association Inc. and receives the newsletter.

The Annual Meeting will be held on 24th of February at Pam Mannings Restaurant, Vincent St., Daylesford at 8pm.

The next walk, rated easy to medium, is on Saturday Feb. 21, starting from Forest Street Reserve in Castlemaine at 9.00am and finishing at Vaughan Springs Reserve. Duration is 5-6 hours. IT IS IMPORTANT if you wish to go on the walk to contact the leader, Norma Dickerson, on 5473 4203, at least 4 DAYS BEFORE THE WALK, so that car shuffles and any special arrangements can be discussed

Over the year the walks will cover the whole trail, the first 6 progressing along the length from Castlemaine to Ballarat, and then some of the side tracks are being explored.

Working Bee Cancelled ...The Committee of the GDTA was disappointed that owing to a poor response last October the working bee was cancelled. "Track maintenance is a growing and important activity for the Association and we appreciate members support for a half day clearing brush and weeds from the track. The Committee would be delighted to hear from any other bush walking, community group or school which would be interested in adopting part of the trail and keeping the track clear. The GDTA has some tools available for use on working bees."

Observations

- * At the December meeting Margaret Badminton reported that the Tawny Frogmouths had two babies, 5 days old on the day of the meeting. She also reported that the Eastern Rosellas had reared two youngsters from the 5 eggs laid in the fencepost.
- * George Broadway told of a Nankeen Night Heron on the creek in the gardens, and an Echidna visiting the garden in Saint Street.
- * Margaret Hunter recorded a Scarlet Robin in her garden for the first time.
- * In January a family of White Winged Choughs has been visiting Chris and Helen Morris's garden for the first time, working through the mulch. They also have Red-browed Firetails and Rufous Whistlers in the garden.
- * There are Rufous Whistlers in the garden at North Castlemaine, too. and three Common Bronzewings have been visiting fairly regularly. Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes were around for about six weeks from early December. A young Echidna seems to have taken over the territory of the old one that was killed last year at North Castlemaine. The colouring is like the one at Tullaroop. Rita Mills
- * Brenda Envall reported a Wedge-tailed Eagle soaring over Harcourt, and Rita Mills saw a Whistling Kite at Ravenswood where the Black Kites have been recently.
- * George Broadway reported parrots nipping off the new shoots on roses at a friend's place. Margaret Willis has had the same problem, and has found that hanging metal cats heads with reflecting eyes works very well at frightening the parrots off!
- * Maureen Dredge has reported what they think is a Hobby (Little Falcon) at the top of Farnsworth St.
- * White Cockatoos have moved into the town, feeding on fruit and nut trees and pines. Kay Turner told how one cockatoo arrives at her place, "screams its head off" to call the others in, and then they all descend on her almond tree.
- * Margaret Willis told of her husband's and daughter's experience with a Tiger Snake as they walked along the channel at Elphinstone. Bryan had stepped over a gate, almost onto the snake - which decided to exit instead of biting apparantly!
- * Rita Mills also told a snake story of a 4 foot Brown Snake which had got itself trapped in a birdcage after it had eaten a mouse. It had managed to get out through the bird wire (how??!) as far as where the mouse was lodged in its gut.
- * On a day out recently Margaret Willis saw Rainbow Bee-eaters at Shelbourne.
- * Maggie Oliver and friend were out at Tullaroop picnicking on the "island" and, on the way out, at last spotted the White-browed Babblers again, this time on the right hand side of the road, opposite the rubbish tip where they have been seen in the past.

C.F.N.C. PROGRAMME

General Meetings are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) hall, at 8.00 pm on the second Friday of each month, except January. Entrances to the car parks are beside the Art Gallery and beside the Church building in Lyttleton Street.

Excursions leave promptly at times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on TOTAL FIRE BAN days.

Business Meetings are held at 38 Campbell Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30pm. All members are invited to attend.

Fri. Feb 13. **Annual Meeting. 8pm.** Presentation of reports and election of office bearers for 1998. Followed by David James of Guildford, speaking on **Wildlife Corridors**. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat. Feb 14. **Looking at Wildlife Corridors**, either Guildford or Sutton Grange. Leave 13 Mostyn St. at 1.30pm

Fri. 6 – Mon. 9 March. **V.F.N.C.A. Campout at Marysville.** Secretary has details. (M.Oliver, 5472 1948)

Fri. Mar. 13 **A Five Year Survey of Birds at Moyston.** Speaker, Simon Kennedy. UCA hall, 8pm

Sat. Mar. 14 **Dawn Breakfast at Glenluce.** Leave 15 Gaulton St. at 6.45am. Bring picnic breakfast and binocs. (These outings are a delight and shouldn't be missed! Ed.)

THE APRIL MEETING AND EXCURSION ARE PART OF THE HERITAGE WEEK PROGRAM, AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC ARE INVITED TO JOIN US ON BOTH OCCASIONS. NOTE THAT BOTH HAVE BEEN BEEN BROUGHT FORWARD 1 WEEK TO THE FIRST WEEK IN APRIL.

Fri Apr. 3 **Geology and Landscape of the Castlemaine District** and its influence on the vegetation. Speaker is E. Perkins. 8pm, UCA hall.

Sat Apr. 4 **Pennyweight Flat/Kalimna Walking Trail circuit.** Leave Victory Park at 1.30pm and return at approx. 4.15 pm. There will be a small charge of \$2. A picnic afternoon tea, provided by the club, will be served at Kalimna Point on the way back. Leader is E. Perkins.

*Volunteers will be needed to set up at the Rotunda for Afternoon tea.

If you can help, contact Maggie Oliver or Margaret Hunter.

Fri 11 to Sun. 13 Sept. **Field Naturalists Get-together at Castlemaine.** Put this weekend on your calendar now. If you can help in any way please let the secretary know. Speakers for the weekend are :-

Friday – Tim Entwistle of the Royal Botanic Gardens and

Saturday – John Landy.

Fri. 16 to Sun 18 Oct. **V.F.N.C.A. Campout at Mildura.**

Subscriptions – Recommendation – that the subscriptions remain as for 1997:

Ordinary membership: Single \$16, Family \$24

Pensioner/student: Single \$12, Family \$18 Supporting : \$25

Newsletter posted: Membership + \$6.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.

P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine. 3450.